

THE NEW YORK TIMES
7 October 1983

By DAVID SHRIBMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 6—Five weeks after a Soviet fighter shot down a South Korean airliner, United States intelligence experts say they have reviewed all available evidence and found no indication that Soviet air defense personnel knew it was a commercial plane before the attack.

The informants say most American intelligence specialists are now confident, as a result of the review, that the SU-15 fighter that fired the rockets at the 747 on Sept. 1 was below and behind the airliner, rather than parallel to it, as high-level officials in Washington at first believed.

The experts said in interviews this week that, given the difficulty of identifying a plane from below, they believed the Soviet pilot probably did not know what kind of plane he was shooting down in Soviet airspace.

The Night Over Sakhalin

Many details remain unknown. But intelligence experts, using transcripts of Soviet radio transmissions, radar impulses and additional intelligence data that American and Japanese officials refuse to discuss publicly, have pieced together a broad picture of what happened on the night of Aug. 31 and Sept. 1 when the South Korean airliner flew over the Soviet Union's Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island.

The informants said the experts had reached general agreement that the Soviet Air Defense Force had displayed a poor capacity to intercept aircraft in Soviet airspace, to distinguish between commercial and military aircraft and to identify a plane before shooting it down.

Denunciations by the U.S.

This information, which was processed by intelligence experts and reportedly sent to the White House and the State Department about two weeks after the attack, appears to cast a somewhat different light on the incident.

A White House spokesman, questioned about new intelligence surrounding the plane incident, said today that the Administration would have no comment on matters involving the gathering or distribution of intelligence.

"We don't talk about intelligence or intelligence reporting," Les Janka, deputy White House press secretary said.

In the days right after the downing, Reagan Administration officials denounced it as an example of a deliberate breach of human rights. The origi-

U.S. EXPERTS SAY SOVIET DIDN'T SEE JET WAS CIVILIAN

REVIEW OF EVIDENCE ENDS

Americans Say Pilot Probably Didn't Know What Kind of Plane He Was Downing

nal assumption in Washington was that the Soviet pilots had closely examined the 747 and shot it down when it seemed to be leaving Soviet airspace, even though they should have known it was a civilian plane.

After studying the new information, Administration officials still insist that the Soviet Union should have established the identity of its target before shooting it down.

Many of the analysts, who have examined the tapes and electronic reconnaissance information that has been accumulating since the downing, are now said to believe, however, that the Soviet air defense command was operating on the assumption that the SU-15 was tracking a smaller RC-135 Air Force reconnaissance plane, and not an airliner.

The informants said that the important conclusion, by most American intelligence experts, that the SU-15 was below, and not parallel to, the South Korean 747 was not reached until the week of Sept. 12.

This was a week after President Reagan said in a television address that the attack was a "crime against humanity" and added:

"The 747 has a unique and distinctive silhouette. There is no way a pilot could mistake this for anything other than a civilian airliner."

Soviet Radio Conversations

Despite the conclusion by most American experts, some intelligence officials continued to maintain that the Soviet pilot must have seen that his target was a commercial jet. They cited Soviet radio conversations indicating that the pilot had moved in front of the jetliner.

In any event, policy makers still insist that the Soviet defenders should have known the identity of the plane even if they did not.

"You end up with the idea that it was their business to know, but that they didn't," said an Administration official, who spoke on the condition that he not be identified.

As a result of the review of evidence, intelligence experts said they believed that the decision to shoot down the 747 was all but made once Soviet radar operators misidentified the jetliner as a RC-135 when it first entered Soviet airspace two hours before it was shot down.

'Unidentified,' Then 'Intruder'

A radar operator at an early part of the incident informed the air defense command in Kamchatka that he had sighted an RC-135. Another radar operator later said he had sighted an "unidentified" plane. Still later, the plane was described as an "intruder."

But by the time the 747, continuing its off-course flight from Anchorage to Seoul, flew over the Soviet island of Sakhalin, anti-aircraft missile batteries were put on alert to stop what was described as an "RC-135."

The informants said they believed that the Soviet Air Defense Force did not use surface-to-air missiles against the jetliner because the plane was out of the missiles' range.

The officials said they believed that the initial identification of the jetliner as a military reconnaissance aircraft became fixed in the minds of Soviet air defense officials and was strengthened after Soviet interceptors were unable to locate the plane for two hours.

Shortcomings Are Suggested

The reason, they said, was that Soviet ground controllers were encountering difficulty in directing the Soviet planes on courses that would intercept that of the South Korean airliner. One problem was timing the takeoff of the interceptors, which are limited in range by their fuel, and then directing them on courses that would lead them to a target flying more than 500 miles an hour at an altitude of seven miles.

The experts said the Soviet inability to solve this problem, at least when the airliner was passing over Kamchatka, suggested important shortcomings.

Intelligence assembled by American experts indicates, they said, that a Soviet interceptor aircraft never came closer than 20 miles to the Korean Air Lines 747 as it flew over Kamchatka.

Some American officials say they believe that the misidentification of the airliner by personnel on the ground may explain why the Soviet pilots did not, in the last minutes of the jetliner's flight, try to make a careful airborne identification of the aircraft, which has a distinctive hump above the cockpit.

'Mindset About Killing Plane'

"The Soviets had a mindset about killing the plane," an American official said. "I get the impression that the guy was thinking only about shooting the plane, with very little sense of anything else."

This information, indicating that the Soviet defenders either thought they were shooting down an RC-135 or an unidentified plane, became known to American intelligence in the days after the downing as intercepted radio and radar signals were given closer scrutiny.

But the officials said it was not known to Administration officials on the day of the incident, when, for example, Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the United States could "see no excuse whatsoever for this appalling act."

An aide to Mr. Shultz said today that the Secretary would have made similar remarks even if he had known all of the

later findings. "It is just as abhorrent to shoot down an unarmed reconnaissance plane," the aide said.

New Details Gathered

The Administration presented its case to the world in the first week after the incident, with a series of statements by Mr. Shultz, the televised speech by President Reagan and a speech by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, the chief American delegate to the United Nations. Since then, many new, important details have been gathered and analyzed, but the State Department and the White House have been reluctant to speak publicly about them.

A White house spokesman declined to specify when President Reagan became aware of the new intelligence.

"We don't talk about intelligence or intelligence reporting," the spokesman said. "There's a feeling here that far too much intelligence has already dribbled out as a result of all this."

The only major factual addition the Administration has made since the first week was a revision in the transcript of the Soviet pilots' conversations to include the fact that the SU-15 fired warning shots at the airliner.

Inquiry by U.N. Agency

The Administration's reticence, officials said, is in part a result of an effort not to compromise American intelli-

gence-gathering activities and of a desire not to overshadow an investigation being undertaken by the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency.

Intelligence experts said the majority view among their colleagues was that the Soviet fighter approached the jetliner from below and that this would have obscured the pilot's image of the front of the jetliner. They said they believed that, since his image of the jetliner was shortened, he saw simply a four-engine aircraft.

"Whatever confusion there was," an Administration spokesman said, "there is a very strong view that because of the flight pattern, which is totally anomalous for an RC-135, and because they did change the designation, the Soviets had sufficient reason to doubt that this was an intelligence plane."

The United States has confirmed that an RC-135, one of a small fleet of surveillance planes that regularly monitor Soviet missile tests and air-defense activities, was in the general area on Sept. 1, when the airliner was shot down, and actually crossed the path that the South Korean airliner followed.

A Reconnaissance Program

Defense Department officials said the RC-135 was part of a reconnais-

sance program known as the Cobra Dane Spacetrack Radar System, with a mission of monitoring Soviet missile tests off the Kamchatka Peninsula from international airspace.

By the time the RC-135 crossed the path taken by the airliner, according to American officials, the two planes were separated by almost 300 miles. The United States maintains that only one RC-135 was in the area, that it flew no closer than 50 miles from the Soviet coastline, that it never passed closer than 75 nautical miles from the airliner and that it was on the ground at its base in Alaska when the 747 was shot down.

The United States based its contention that the two planes did not come any closer than 75 nautical miles from each other by monitoring the signals produced by Soviet radar, according to American officials. At a news conference early last month, Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff, said the two aircraft "rendezvoused" and for about 10 minutes were flying "side by side."

American officials have disputed Marshal Ogarkov's version of the incident, arguing that the rendezvous theory is not supported by the intelligence data they have assembled.

The Soviet Union has repeatedly charged that its air defenses believed that the 747 was on a reconnaissance mission.